

OK, first your RISUS PASCHALIS, your Easter joke. While shopping for vacation clothes, a woman and her husband passed a display of women's bathing suits. It had been at least 10 years and 20 pounds since she had last even considered buying a bathing suit, so she sought her husband's advice. "What do you think?" she asked. "Should I get a bikini or an all-in-one?" "Better get a bikini," he replied. "You'd never get it all in one." He's still in intensive care. And you get a bonus since I wasn't here last weekend. The graveside service just barely finished, when there was a massive bolt of lightning, accompanied by even more thunder rumbling in the distance....The husband of the deceased looked at the pastor and calmly said, "Well, she's there."

First, it might be helpful to do a little theology about the resurrected body of Jesus, which helps to open up a deeper understanding of all of these Easter appearance texts. It's clear that what those who experienced Jesus after Easter was their friend, teacher and companion, Jesus, raised from the dead. But what He looked like is hard to pin down. Some of the Gospel stories are confusing on this point, seemingly at odds with one another. In some post-resurrection stories, Jesus seems distinctly PHYSICAL, as in today's account where He asks for something to eat. In the second Sunday of Easter's gospel every year we hear the story of 'doubting' Thomas, who Jesus invites to see His wounds and put his finger in Jesus' side. Therefore, we can conclude that the Risen Christ had a body, and so it was easy for the disciples to recognize Him?

Not exactly – because in other passages the disciples have a hard time identifying Him at all. On Easter morning Mary Magdalene mistakes Him for the gardener, until He says her name. Then suddenly, like the disciples en route to Emmaus, she recognizes Him and says, "Rabbouni!" In another appearance the disciples are fishing on the Sea of Galilee and even when Jesus calls to them from the shore, they seem not to know Him (or recognize His voice), until they draw closer to the shore. Then suddenly the Beloved Disciples grasps who this is and says to Peter, 'It is the Lord' In these cases, it seems that Jesus has a body, but not one that is easily recognizable.

And yet in other stories Jesus seems distinctly UNPHYSICAL. He suddenly appears in a locked room (allowing us to assume He walks through walls or closed doors) or, as in the story of Emmaus, He simply vanishes in front of their eyes. What's going on?

Here we tread on mysterious territory. As we've seen, many parts of the Gospel story are familiar to us and can be more or less understood 2000 years after they occurred. Even though none of us lives in first-century Galilee, we know what it feels like to be sick, what a farmer does, and what a lily looks like. Most of us have seen a sheep, been on a boat, and had a sick relative. Many of us have been fishing. We've all seen violent storms, maybe even over a lake. Many parts of the Gospels are part of our experience.

But the risen Christ poses an unanswerable question: What does someone look like after rising from the dead? No one can say. We are walking on unknown ground, and what theologians – and the church – say is merely speculation. Theologians sometimes refer to Jesus' appearance in His 'glorified body,' a state that is both physical (He still has a body) and wonderfully transformed (His new body is unlike other bodies and is difficult to recognize). This can be a helpful way of thinking about it: there is a body, but it is glorified, created anew by God. And remember that Jesus wasn't simply 'revived,' as if He had been unconscious: this new body will never die.

For me, these seemingly contradictory descriptions – physical/spiritual, recognizable/unrecognizable, natural/supernatural – indicate 2 things – the difficulty of describing the most profound of all spiritual experiences and the unprecedented and non-repeatable quality of what the disciples witnessed. Look, I was lucky enough to experience the birth of a great-nephew and godson. But if you ask me what it was like, I would probably have a very different experience than my niece who was doing the birthing! I could say it was frightening, and joyful and beautiful and mystical. And she might say it was all of those things and say it was

full of unexplainable love – and exhausting to the bone.” So what’s the truth? All of it – and then some more! (all of this adapted from James Martin, JESUS: A PILGRIMAGE, p. 431-433).

OK, so what? What does the Resurrection have to do with us? What does it mean that “the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in His name and that we are witnesses to these things.” (Lk 24:48) How do we witness? Well, it has something to do with Jesus command to “Take up our cross daily,” and “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Here are some thoughts, and once again, we are at the deep heart of our faith – the Paschal Mystery – this mystery of death and resurrection that stands at the center of what we believe about life and life-with-Jesus.

First, we don’t have to look for our crosses. Life will give them to us. Catastrophic illness, an accident, a death in the family, a fractured relationship, money issues, long-term loneliness, trouble in school, struggles on the job – problems just come. And the real cross is the one that we don’t want – because otherwise it’s hardly a cross. Remember that Jesus did not court death, nor did He beg for the Cross in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Cross eventually came to Him. And of course, the Cross is not the result of any sin on the part of Jesus. It’s true that some suffering is the result of bad or immoral decisions. But most suffering is not. Even the sinless one suffered.

Second, we are invited by God, as Jesus was, to accept our crosses. This does not mean that we accept things unthinkingly, like a dumb animal laboring under a burden. Nor do bromides like ‘offer it up’ solve the problem of suffering. The idea of offering our pain to God is helpful in some situations, but not in others. For many years, a religious sister I knew and loved was confined in a nursing home, in constant and debilitating pain. One day her religious superior came to visit. When the sister spoke of the pain she was enduring, her superior replied, “Think of Jesus on the Cross.” The elderly sister said, “He was only on the Cross for three hours.” Some advice does more harm than good.

So what does it mean to accept our crosses? To begin with, it means understanding that suffering is part of everyone’s life. Accepting our cross means that at some point – after the shock, frustration, sadness, and even rage – all perfectly normal responses – then as Christ’s disciples, we must accept that some things cannot be changed. The cross tells us that suffering is part of our human reality. Accepting this truth is a big part of becoming a mature, holy adult. We often have a difficult time with this. And we have a Savior who understands the reality from the inside of His own body. Acceptance is that we are invited to on our Crosses. Acceptance means not passing along any bitterness that we feel about our suffering. It doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t talk about it, complain about it, or even cry about it with friends or family. And of course we are invited to be honest in prayer about our suffering.

But if we’re angry about our boss, or school, or our family, we don’t pass along that anger to others and magnify their suffering. Having a lousy boss or teacher is no reason to be mean to our family. Struggling through a rotten situation is no excuse for being insensitive to our coworkers or family. Problems at school do not mean that we can be cruel to our parents. Christ did not lash out at people when He was suffering, even when He was lashed by a whip.

Third, when Jesus speaks about those who ‘lose their life,’ He is not talking only about physical death. We believe that we are promised eternal life if we follow the way of Jesus. But there are many little deaths that come before the final one. We are called to let some parts of our lives die, so that other parts may live. Is a desire for money preventing us from being more compassionate? Perhaps our need for wealth needs to die. Are we so yoked to our own comfort that we don’t allow other people’s needs to impinge on ours? Maybe our selfishness needs to die so that we can experience a rebirth of generosity. Is pride keeping us from listening to other people’s constructive criticism and therefore stunting our spiritual growth? Maybe all these things need to die too.

Fourth, wait for the resurrection. In every cross, there is an invitation to new life in some way, and often in a mysterious way. To me it seems unclear whether Jesus understood PRECISELY what would happen after He entrusted Himself to His Father in the Garden. Clearly He gave Himself over entirely. But did He know where that would lead? There are indications of His foreknowledge in the gospels, but in His agony in the Garden and His cry of abandonment on the cross, it seems to indicate that even He didn't know what kind of new life the Father had in store. Perhaps even Jesus was surprised on Easter. For me this makes His self-gift even more wonderful.

This is why we as Christ's disciples speak of meeting God in the cross. By ignoring or failing to embrace the Cross we miss opportunities to know God in a deeper way. The Cross is often where we meet God because our vulnerability can make us more open to God's grace. Many of those in recovery programs see the moment of the acceptance of their disease as the moment they began to find new life.

Fifth, God's gift is often not what we expect. Mary Magdalene discovered that on Easter Sunday. And – as with Mary – sometimes it takes time to grasp that what we are experiencing is a resurrection. Later on, as we will see, the other disciples will have a hard time recognizing Jesus. As the apostles discovered on Easter, resurrection also does not come WHEN we expect it. It may take years for it to come at all. And it's usually difficult to describe, because it's OUR resurrection. It may not make sense to other people. A good friend of mine is a young man, married with kids, who has MS. He speaks of it as his gift. "It makes me see the whole world differently," he says. Where the world sees only the cross, a believer sees the possibility of something else.

Finally, nothing is impossible with God. That's the ultimate message of Easter. We are so often like the disciples – we fail to realize – over and over again – that we are dealing with the Living God, the same one whose message to Mary at the Annunciation was "Nothing will be impossible with God." It's often very difficult for us to see beyond our pain, beyond our present moment. It's easy for us to believe "nothing can change, there is no hope." This is when we end up mired in despair, which can sometimes be a reflection of pride. That is, we think that we know better than God. It is a way of saying, "God does not have the power to change this situation." So we constantly need to return to the Resurrection. We are called to believe what those first witnesses believed – He is risen. He rules over all. Nothing is impossible for Him. Amen. (adapted from Martin, op.cit., p. 410-15)